



Neville, P. (2017). Happiness research ignores social factors. *BMJ*, 357, [j2252]. <https://doi.org/10.1136/bmj.j2252>

Peer reviewed version

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[10.1136/bmj.j2252](https://doi.org/10.1136/bmj.j2252)

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Happiness research ignores social factors

As a sociologist, I was interested to read the commissioned article 'What's the point of happiness research?' In my discipline, there has been much debate and critique as to the value and purpose of happiness research.^{1,2} Undoubtedly, happiness and well-being confer personal and interpersonal value. However, we need to question the purpose of research that is interested in making something that was previously considered a private concern into a matter of public and collective interest.

A sociological understanding of happiness research is important to medicine, because though health, happiness and well-being are experienced individually, they also resonate as a collective phenomenon shaped by social, political and economic factors. It is worth noting that the origins of happiness research coincide with the rise of neo-liberalism and its associated values of 'free will', 'self-responsibility' and 'individual choice'.^{3,4} Neoliberal governments have been found to use psychometrics to legitimate their social policies of austerity, blaming individuals for their marginalisation, rather than acknowledging structural and systemic issues with the distribution of wealth and resources.⁵ Happiness research too is inclined to ignore the role that social/structural factors play in our configurations of well-being. Issues around access to resources, the gap between rich and poor, and living in a society with adequate job opportunities, are equally, if not more, important social determinants of health and well-being than the mere possession of 'happiness'.⁶ In fact, decades of health sociology research confirm access to resources as the most consistent determinant of health and well-being.⁶

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